

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

Despite being traumatised by *Jaws* as a child, Ben Mendelsohn couldn't pass up the opportunity to work with Steven Spielberg – playing the corporate evil in *Ready Player One*. Words Gill Pringle

Sat in the opposite corner to Chris Hemsworth and Hugh Jackman's shiny superheroes, Ben Mendelsohn has used his trademark sneer to carve out a series of damaged souls, thugs and outright psychopaths.

But beneath his celluloid veneer of evil ambiguity, he cannot deny he was a pure fanboy in the presence of Steven Spielberg when he was called in to meet the celebrated director, casting for sci-fi action flick *Ready Player One*.

“**He's Steven Spielberg. I don't expect to see another director like him in my life. He's extraordinary, and gentle too**”

“I grew up with Mr. Spielberg's films so I was happy to get that meeting. But I was also very shy, and did a lot of looking at the ground,” admits Mendelsohn, 49, when *STACK* meets him at Warner Bros. Studios in Burbank.

“I said, ‘Look, I don't know if you want to give me the job or not. But this is good enough. Whatever happens from here is jam’.”

As a boy, he was traumatised by Spielberg's *Jaws*.

“*Jaws* for Australians? Terrifying. Because we got ‘em. I don't care about Amity Island. We got sharks! My mum took me to see *Jaws* at the drive-in and I couldn't make it over the seat.”

To this day you won't find him in the surf-happy company of Hemsworth or Jackman in the ocean. “I can swim in a pool – but I'm only alright if I can touch the bottom. I blame *Jaws* for that.”

Uncertain whether he had made a good impression on Spielberg, Mendelsohn waited three long months to learn he'd won the role of machiavellian Nolan Sorrento in the screen adaptation of Ernest Cline's 2011 best-selling dystopian novel.

He doesn't hold back in describing his megalomaniac alter-ego. “Nolan is a d-ckhead; a jerk-off, a little wounded vanity suck that just wants everyone to tell him how beautiful he is. He's a corporate a-hole.”

His awe of Spielberg continued onto *Ready Player One*'s UK set, referring to the director as the Governor or the Boss.

“That's what he's known as – it's hardly a state secret. He's Steven Spielberg. I don't expect to see another director like him in my life. He's singular. He's extraordinary, and gentle too.”

Born in Melbourne, Mendelsohn and his two brothers led a gypsy childhood, traveling between boarding schools in the UK, US and Germany as his neuroscientist father followed a career in medical research, his late mother working as a nurse.

"There was a lot of moving around and I suppose that's part of where you learn to adapt to fit in. Oh, it was rough and tough," he sighs, running hands through a mop of floppy grey hair.

Salvation came when he signed up for a high school drama class; at aged 16 winning recurring roles on Aussie soaps *The Henderson Kids* and *Neighbours*, opposite Kylie Minogue no less.

By 18 he thought he had it made following his critically acclaimed role in coming-of-age film, *The Year My Voice Broke*.

"Thankfully, I got old enough to go from a boy who looks like he's been up to mischief, to a man who looks like he's been up to mischief," he smiles.

Together with contemporaries Guy Pearce, Russell Crowe, Noah Taylor, Joel Edgerton and Jason Clarke, he became a Los Angeles frequent-flier on the audition circuit. However, unlike his counterparts, nothing seemed to click until 2010's *Animal Kingdom*, transforming his career overnight. In 2011 alone, Chris Nolan cast him in *The Dark Knight Rises* while enjoying prominent roles opposite Ryan Gosling in *The Place Beyond the Pines* and with Brad Pitt in *Killing Them Softly*.

Making no apology for seeking to expand his career by finally moving to Hollywood, he says, "I came here. There was no process. I've been coming here a long time and I was in Australia for a good deal longer than a lot of the other guys. I lived at home for a very, very long time. And I dare say I did a lot more at home than any of them. In fact, you could probably add a bunch of them together and I've done more at home than them. When they get to my numbers, then we can talk about that some more..."

Bringing a nuanced brand of malice to all his villainous roles, his Emmy-winning performance

as the sexy black sheep in series *Bloodline* cemented his bad-boy kudos, leading to a coveted role as Orson Krennic in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*.

If his typecasting bothers him, he's not letting on, pointing to his recent portrayal of King George VI in *Darkest Hour* opposite Oscar-winning actor Gary Oldman.

"It was really ballsy of Joe Wright to cast me as George VI. He and Gaz had seen me in *Starred Up* so I guess they knew I could do the accent," he says of his role as a career criminal in the searing British prison drama.

"But, you know what? It's more fun to play the bad guy. You get to behave in ways you might want to behave in normal life, but can't. So I don't mind being a specialist in bad."

In *Ready Player One*'s immersive virtual universe, where the humanity of 2045 escape their miserable existence by living in avatars, Sorrento is arguably a role he was born to play.

"I've played video games for most of my life, although pinball was my first love in the '70s. I grew up right in the sweet spot for this.

I had a TRS-80 and a Commodore 64, so I know the turf."

He's still a regular gamer, although he's not about to divulge his player name. "I may have a few names," he teases.

"Do you think I'm going to tell you them? *Pleeease?* I'm not having some bunch of little troll-y freaks coming up to me. I

think that's part of the joy of that world isn't it? That you get to go in and be what you wanna be. On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

Mendelsohn doesn't take his second career start for granted. For the first time in his career, fans now recognise him on the street, smiling warmly despite the fact they usually only know him as the bad guy.

“
**It's more
fun to play
the bad guy**
”



T.J. Miller as the equally badass iROK

BREAKING BAD

Ben Mendelsohn rogues' gallery

ANIMAL KINGDOM (2010)

The part of Andrew 'Pope' Cody – the most psychopathic member of a Melbourne crime family – was written specifically for Mendelsohn by writer-director David Michôd.



THE PLACE BEYOND THE PINES (2012)

As mechanic Robin Van Der Hook, Mendelsohn leads Ryan Gosling into a life of crime.



ROGUE ONE: A STAR WARS STORY (2016)

As the Empire's Advanced Weapons Director, Orson Krennic, Mendelsohn shares scenes with Darth Vader and Grand Moff Tarkin.



"I've never had anyone want to attack me over that. Never. Other reasons? Yeah, but not that," he says with a sly grin. "People don't expect to see someone from *Star Wars* on the streets.

"Being a movie star wasn't something I dreamed about. Living in the suburbs of Australia, it wasn't really a dream that anyone had. I still have moments of 'wow'. I get very emotional about how good things are and where life is for me."

He will next be seen stepping into the tights of another legendary baddie, playing the Sheriff of Nottingham to Taron Egerton's *Robin Hood*, and is currently

filming *Captain Marvel* with Brie Larson. He will also portray Henry IV opposite Joel Edgerton's Falstaff in *The King*.

Mendelsohn knows he's finally hit his stride and can't complain that his *Star Wars* role was limited to one film.

"I am just happy that I built the Death Star. They can't take that away from me." ☺

• **Ready Player One**
is out July 4